

College Ready New England

Regional Collaboration Explores Models For Readiness and Success

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The New England states face the confluence of several challenges that test their ability to compete.

These include ongoing economic globalization and technological change, the continued decline of traditional industries and slow labor force growth. Further, the region is aging quickly and will experience low overall population growth—with increases occurring primarily among minority and immigrant populations whose postsecondary participation has been historically low.

Add to that mix the projected decline in the annual supply of high school graduates beginning in 2008 and the highest-in-the-nation college prices. No wonder there is regionwide concern about whether New England will continue to have enough individuals with skills and credentials to compete in the global economy.

In 2003, these looming shadows motivated a gathering of concerned New Englanders—representing business, K-12 and postsecondary education, government and a variety of nonprofit organizations—to create a regionwide initiative called the College Ready New England (CRNE) P-16 Alliance, whose development has been supported by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

CRNE leaders spent much of 2005 charting initiatives to ensure that all New England students leave high school well-prepared for postsecondary success and to improve the college attendance and completion rates of underrepresented students, particularly low-income and minority students and first-generation college-goers.

In this process, CRNE participants have looked closely at the six New England states and across the United States to inform their work. The objective: to find tested and cutting-edge practices, policies and programs to increase college readiness and success. From this, an integrated framework for pursuing statewide and regionwide initiatives has emerged. Here is what we have found ...

Mandate and goal

States succeeding at increasing college readiness and attainment have done so under the aegis of specific mandates and goals championed by key leaders, including business executives, governors and legislators.

Oklahoma, for example, launched “Brain Gain 2010,” with the explicit goal of increasing the percentage of individuals with college degrees by 40 percent between 1996 and 2010. Texas launched the “College for Texans” campaign, challenging the state to prepare and enroll an additional 300,000 college students by 2015—above and beyond the 200,000 expected to enroll annually. It

also specified a focus on Hispanic, African-American and low-income students.

In New England, Maine’s Compact for Higher Education appears to lead the way. Its mandate is to make Maine residents among the best-educated in America by 2019. The goals include: increasing the percentage of Maine high school graduates who enroll in college directly from high school from the current 52 percent to 75 percent by 2014; and helping 11,000 of Maine’s 112,000 working-age adults with previous college enrollment to complete their degrees over the next decade.

Leaders in all six New England states consistently speak of the importance of addressing our growing competitiveness crisis, but without a firm, shared mandate and measurable goals, little progress can be expected.

Statewide collaboration

A uniform message from those we studied was that states must get “everybody at the table” and bridge gaps between education systems, institutions and program providers. In fact, mandates and goals for improving readiness and success have proven a catalyst for developing and institutionalizing statewide collaborations and partnerships.

North Carolina realized that mounting a statewide readiness and success campaign necessitated that policies be revised to better integrate K-12 and higher education. The governor established an “Education Cabinet,” uniting K-12 and higher education leaders, that resulted in several innovations: standardized high school transcripts, grading systems and course requirements; and comprehensive articulation and transfer agreements. Subsequently, the state created partnerships of K-12 institutions, public and private colleges, state student financial aid programs, GEAR UP counselors, early college awareness programs, high school guidance counselors and college admissions officers. These partners worked together to inventory existing college readiness resources but also to design and implement new programs, policies and resources.

The New England states have made important strides in recent months in expanding statewide collaboration and alignment. Three states—Maine, Massachusetts and Rhode Island—recently received million-dollar-plus National Governors Association grants to bring together K-12, higher education and government leaders and policymakers to reconsider high schools and improve college readiness.

Similarly, some New England states have pursued or implemented formal P-16 councils. These councils bring together the key groups and institutions that

form each segment of a state's "education pipeline"—and unite them in removing barriers to student readiness and success.

Branded resources

Have you noticed the varied organizations offering advice to students preparing for college? How does a student or parent know which ones to use or how to remember and access them?

Propelled by a statewide mandate and goals—and with key stakeholders, resources and programs aligned—several states have successfully launched branded college readiness campaigns. These campaigns use well-crafted messages, slogans and logos that consistently identify them, their marketing resources and outreach tools. Savvy corporations market this way and states increasingly are following their lead.

The sharpest campaigns also have a single, well-branded and publicized contact point—usually a website and a toll-free phone number—through which integrated resources can be accessed. Essentially, they provide students, parents, educators and counselors with "one-stop shopping" for college readiness and success. While the "back-end" of this system is complex, aggregating information and resources from multiple organizations, institutions and education systems across a state, the "front-end" is made relatively seamless for the user.

North Carolina created a branded, single-source web portal to, in the campaign's own words, "Help students plan, apply, and pay for college." With time, the web portal was complemented by a resource center providing toll-free call-in advising and resources for first-generation students. The primary goal: to bring together in one location, and under one brand, all the information about higher education opportunities in North Carolina, tailored to the three primary user groups of students, parents and school counselors.

In New England, Maine has begun branding a statewide "College for ME" campaign, while Connecticut and Massachusetts employ online systems similar to North Carolina and other states. Ask yourself: "Do I know of one primary, easily identifiable source of comprehensive college readiness resources in my state?"

College access marketing

Messages about the importance of college readiness and success must effectively compete in a media-saturated society. It is about getting "mindshare" and motivating specific behaviors. Accordingly, several leading states have adopted the sophisticated marketing strategies used in successful, cutting-edge efforts like the "Truth" anti-tobacco campaign.

In 2000, for example, Kentucky's General Assembly requested a statewide public information and marketing campaign aimed at adults and employers to increase awareness of education and training opportunities. The

campaign used cable and broadcast television as well as radio to reach a target audience of less-educated adults statewide. The results were notable: over the course of a year, the number of individuals completing GEDs grew; nearly 10,000 additional workers enrolled in workplace education programs; and adult education enrollments grew by more than 20,000.

The seeds of college access marketing campaigns exist in some New England states, including Maine and Massachusetts. But media development and sustained dissemination are costly. The New England states must work together, as 15 southern states now do, to share media resources and save time and money.

Grassroots organization

Successful statewide campaigns also must reach down into the communities and neighborhoods in which future college-goers and their families live, work, worship and play—to provide grassroots support for improving readiness and success.

College for Texans built a statewide network of community-based organizations (CBOs) including Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, Parent-Teacher Organizations, social service and health agencies, Scouts, 4-H groups, service clubs and business groups. The network mobilized thousands of community leaders in outreach activities aimed at both parents and students. It also made small grants to more than 500 CBOs, trained thousands of volunteer presenters and provided free outreach kits with ready-made presentations for use with parents and students.

Standing together

Despite competitiveness challenges, New England's inventive spirit is increasingly evident as key stakeholders come together to create initiatives for increasing college readiness and success. This integrated framework can serve as a benchmark for measuring the adequacy of states' efforts.

There is also a growing understanding of the importance of regional collaboration, in which CRNE will seek to play a key role: leveraging the resources, experiences and best practices of the six states—and others outside the region; sharing costs and expertise to develop cutting-edge campaigns, tools and resources; and building public will and a shared commitment to change and improvement.

Long known for its brainpower, New England has some catching up to do. College Ready New England will help the six states compete more effectively by collaborating to improve readiness and success.

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